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The Concept of Humanity in an Age of Globalization

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4. The Problem of "Difference" in Discourses of Civilization and Culture

The Predicament of Communication and Humanity

Globalization is characterized by contradictory forces, universalizing and particularizing. Universalizing forces are best captured by the tropes of *flows* (of ideas, images, capital, goods and services, technology, and humans across national borders), *shrinking* (cultural and social distances), *hybrid* (spaces where cultural and social borders blur and mix in heady ways), and *transnational* (codes and courts of a rights regime especially for rights of capital, intellectual property, and somewhat more contentiously, for human rights).[1] Despite the ability of these tropes to capture the complex and high intensity modes of interaction across diverse cultural, social, political and economic contexts, it is useful to remind ourselves that they do not capture the *unevenness* of any of these flows, shrinkage, hybridity or transnationalism, all of which deepen inequalities of power and wealth. For example, globalization proceeds simultaneously with concentration of capital in very particular global sites of power, concentration of control of media conglomerates, domination of weak(ened) and devalued national currencies and economies, increasing digital divides that 'subjugates knowledges'[2] through establishing hegemony over what is "knowledge" itself, and the growing barriers to the flows of human subjects across national borders that are resurrected or newly erected even while eroding the sovereignty of national-states especially in planning and implementing social welfare programs.

Attention to this unevenness of globalization allows us to acknowledge the

1 See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), Jan Nederveen-Pieterse *Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

2 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings* (New York: Pantheon Press, 1980); Gayatri Spivak, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (ed.) Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

fact that globalization also brings in its wake localizing forces of *particularization.* Primary among these is the rise of local, national and regional *identities* seeking to reinforce cultural and national borders and boundaries or at the very least do not embrace the easy hybridity, shrinkage and fluidity mentioned above (for example, growth of regional trading blocs, restrictions to immigration, rise in ethno-chauvinist movements and nationalisms), the growing *disparities* especially in the economic realm due in no small measure to the unevenness referred to above within and across nation-states, and the worldwide calls and protests to slow down, halt or change the course of a universalizing global economy in the interests of local *communities* seeking the right to livelihood and dignity to make their own choices.[3]

The contradictory forces of universalization (or homogenization) and particularization (or heterogenization) pose a problem for working with and through ideas of "humanity in a global age." Each of these forces throws up a modal human Subject whose conditions of existence negate the possibilities of other human Subjects. The forces of universalization have given rise to mass society based on consumption and the market. Touraine has identified this process as "desocialization," i.e., the "disappearance of the social roles, norms and values that were once used to construct the life-world," although he is at pains to caution against viewing this notion as "a decline or loss."[4] I prefer to view this as the rise of a form of sociality that is fundamentally shaped by objectifying desires, including objectification of the Self. In other words, the individual is increasingly individuated or "dis-associated" from established forms of groups (family, ethnic group, community) due to demands of the market. This gives rise to newer forms of association in which the individual is not subsumed by the group but instead appears primarily as a consuming Self. The figure of the *alienated consumer* – alienated from the process of production but able to consume the product only as a commodity rather than as a product of labor – captures this situation.

On the other hand, the forces of partcularization have simultaneously given rise to nostalgic, militant and many times, chauvinist communitarianism and nationalism that seek to control individuals via authoritarian communities and nations. Again, Touraine tries to capture this as the "re-construction of non-social identities based on cultural loyalties rather than social roles" that result from the devastation of the market which leaves increasing numbers of people at a loss to define oneself as a citizen or a worker.[5] I take citizen and worker to mean

3 See Balmurli Natrajan, "Masking and Veiling Protests: Culture and Ideology in Representing Globalization," *Cultural Dynamics* 15:2 (2003): 213 – 35.

4 Alain Touraine, *Can We Live Together? Equality and Difference*, transl. David Macey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 38 – 39.

5 Ibid., 31.

the quintessential *producers* of polity, sociality, meaning and materiality. Touraine's characterization of such identities based on "cultural loyalty" as being "non-social" depends upon a reading of the notion "culture" as a primordial belongingness that makes the provincial identities of actors no longer based on "what they do" as social actors (i. e., within social relations, positions, interactions) but "what they are," i. e., the preconfigured cultural group. Again, the use of "what" instead of "who" is significant in questioning the nature of the new subjectivities thrown up by communitarian identities. I will capture this process through the figure of the *communitarian proprietor* for whom social interaction is emptied of its innovative, creative and hence improvisable or indeterminable aspects to become the far more determined interaction across various always-already-made *belongings* (cultural, ethnic or national heritages or communities) and rights to this inalienable form of "property."

Significantly, both, the *alienated consumer* and the *communal proprietor* depend upon the objectification of the Other, one as the object of desire and pleasure, the other as the object of exclusion and radical alterity. Since one communicates only with subjects, not with objects, it could be argued that neither of the above subjects allows genuine communication with the Other. Worse, both of them are modal figures of a globalizing world and assume and naturalize the process of Othering, which mutely exists as a condition of possibility of both. In light of this "communicative predicament," the problem of humanity then becomes how to enable individual Subjects to recognize and relate to Others as Subjects. Touraine takes this as his main problem and observes that "[f]reeing the Subject from the power of markets and empires, on the one hand, and the confinement of communities, on the other, is the necessary pre-condition for the establishment of Subject-to-Subject communication."[6] He therefore explores the conditions of possibility for what he calls the "personal Subject." My focus here is different from Touraine. It considers the above predicament of communication and humanity in a globalizing age by focusing on how two discourses, that of "civilization" and of "culture" must be negotiated in order to construct the kind of Subject spoken of by Touraine. My arguments are based upon an understanding of ideology *as discourse* that interpellates or addresses and hence forms human subjects by telling them in many ways as to what exists, what is right and what is good.[7] In other words, the discourses of civilization and culture are taken as two key modes of producing S / subjects. But before we get to that, it is useful to preface another quest for ideas of "humanity" by asking: Why do we need an idea of humanity? Or, who needs an idea of humanity?

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6 Ibid., 57.

7 Gőran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1980).

The Problem of "Difference"

One of the consequences of living in the kind of world that Einstein once characterized as one where "our technology has long surpassed our humanity," is that the notion of "humanity" has itself been used instrumentally by sections of humanity to portray some humans – always others – as not really humans and hence arrogating to themselves the power to do things to those Others. Usually, this is based upon representations of the behavior of Others as at best strange and exotic, and at worst unnatural and degraded, and hence always, dangerous. This logic is expanded to claim human authority and right over all other life forms and nature itself. Turning a remark by Oscar Wilde we can remind ourselves that "the world is divided into the human and the inhuman; and it is the humans who do the dividing." The idea of humanity then must be approached with caution since the idea is itself arguably constitutive of power – it bestows a power upon the Subject who invokes it at the point of its invocation, primarily due to its universalizing pretensions. As an idea, "humanity" has enabled the exercise of power through much of world history and under the cloak of science since the 19th century. Indeed, it continues to do so even after poststructuralist pronouncements of the death of the Subject and the Enlightenment project of humanism. There is now a scholarly consensus that the "civilizing process," i. e., the political technology built around the idea of humanity that takes as its objective the humanization of the inhuman, not-quite-human, or not-yet-human sections of the potentially human population, always accompanied and enabled colonial power and modern nation-states, and continues to be nourished in the new age of the American Empire.

Thinking about ideas of humanity, a grand topic by any reckoning has often tended to be an interrogation of *things* – substances, qualities, characteristics or properties – that could be argued and shown to be held in common by *all* humans. Such a "substantialist" approach does not lead too far. Even when there may be agreement on certain things that are perceived to be held in common by all of humanity's members (for instance, uniquely human linguistic traits such as reflexivity, displacement or prevarication), there remains the question of how such commonalities compare with the even more readily apparent "differences" among humans? Are these shared things more widespread, more important, more dominant, more fundamental or more essential than those other differences?

Here, the field of anthropology acts as a useful foil as it majestically continues to be the torchbearer for all things *different* through its comprehensive testimony to all such things *not* held in common by human beings. Although the

biological fact of "humanity" is agreed upon by scholars,[8] its sociocultural aspect is far less so. For, in addition to the ambiguous meanings of the term "humanity," the ontological status of sociocultural "things" are also open to interrogation.[9] It seems impossible (and undesirable) to have formal and normative definitions of the sociocultural sense of humanity. From a conventional cultural anthropological point of view, the only potential candidate for a common humanity is the incest taboo – the only true potentially cultural universal – which too alas is variously interpreted, since what constitutes a family also varies tremendously from the inveterate lumpers such as the Hawaiians who do not care to distinguish any but the most basic classificatory kin to the extreme splitters such as the Sudanese who distinguish among every conceivable classificatory kin. Such is then the stuff that debates over humanity are made up of, at least those that take as their point of departure a notion of "shared-ness" and a perspective that social reality is made up of substances.

This paper proposes that ideas of humanity are best approached when the focus is not as much on what we share as humans but on how we negotiate perceived and real "difference" while living in the same social space with other entities who we take to be at least biologically classified as humans. The shift in focus from sharedness to difference allows us to locate our interrogation at those points of "rupture" where humanity's constructed nature becomes apparent, and not simply a "discovery" of an ontological reality (we, humans, are, as Geertz said long ago, "unfinished animals" in need of making ourselves human, via culture). The problem of humanity viewed as a problem of difference is an epistemological problem ("how do we know and claim that we are humans") rather than the ontological one ("how are we humans or not" or "what makes us all humans"). This demands that we view social reality as a *relational* reality instead of a substantive reality along the lines of Bourdieu who, drawing from Cassirer, Elias and Marx, put it, "the *relational* mode of thinking which is that of modern mathematics, and physics, and which identifies the real not with sub-

8 Many times, debates in this vein carry on without acknowledging the antecedent ground covered. For instance, the case for the existence of *only one human species* (the biological aspect of "humanity") has been made many times during the 20th century chiefly via the debate over the notion of human "races." It is now an accepted position in academia that "race" as a naturally existing biological division at the level of sub-species among humans is an invalid category to explain human diversity. Yet, debates continue within the margins of academia and more so in mainstream public discourse without acknowledging the large academic consensus over this issue (see publications under "Is Race Real?" at the Social Science Research Council website in response to a popular piece that legitimized the dubious category of 'race", http://raceandgenomics.ssrc.org/).

9 Anthropologist Dan Sperber faced headlong the question of "what kind of things are sociocultural things?" by providing a short answer that cultural things exist at the level of cognitive mental representations that are also public material. See Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 9.

stances but with relations."[10] For our purpose this means that whatever we share or don't as humans is available, not in our discrete existence as individuals or groups, but in our *relational* existence which exists prior to and as the condition of social interaction of individuals. It is here, in the relational existence that we make ourselves humans. It also means that we acknowledge putative *cultural* differences among humans as always discursively constructed by human action and materialized in and through social relations, and then focus on issues of communication and conviviality through, with, and across differences.[11]

Apart from helping us negotiate problems of essentialism when invoking the notion of culture, such an approach to humanity is also useful to engage with recent debates around the notion of human rights, the status of the individual, and the claims of cultural groups to having rights.[12] Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to seriously enter into the vibrant debates on this issue, it would be useful to briefly outline my own position regarding the notion of cultural group rights since this has all too often become a simple target of attack in the debates around democracy, critical multiculturalism and liberal humanism. While it will be clear in this paper that the notion of cultural group is impossible and undesirable to assume as a "social fact" and needs to be rigorously shown as socially constructed at all times, it is impossible to ignore the limitations of European Enlightenment's offerings of 'abstract equality' as constituting a liberal version of democracy.[13] This tension, between a notion of culture that does not easily assume the boundedness, wholeness and primordialness of cultural groups and a notion of humanism and democracy that does not entirely empty humanity of difference by abstracting out a rationally reasoned and communicative human being, has been bridged admirably in my opinion by trimming the notion of cultural groups to accommodate the rights of exit and association and undiluted civil rights for members of all cultural

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10 See P. Bourdieu, and L.J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), Mustafa Emirbayer, "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 103:2 (1997): 281 – 317.

11 Although I do not tackle it here, I believe that such a position is impossible to achieve without a thoroughgoing anti-essentialism. See Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1989) for a succinct discussion of essentialism and anti-essentialism in the context of identities.

12 Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), Seyla Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture: Equality and Diversity in the Global Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

13 Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boudnaries of the Political* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

groups.[14] But lest this be understood as a "victory" of liberal humanism (albeit somewhat chastised) it is necessary to underscore the fact that assuming that we only live life as individuals (and hence only allowing for individual rights) actually aids the reproduction of power and inequality since the world is indeed organized around the distribution of group rights which are already in existence whether we view them as such or not. Examples are numerous but will include the fact of the rights of capital, the much more tenuous rights of labor, rights of nations, rights of children and rights of women. For a capitalist, a worker, a citizen, or a child and a woman do indeed derive particular rights within a global rights regime due to being considered as members of a group. The problem arises when the notion of *cultural* rights is invoked, and here too, one needs to recognize that some rights (such as those of aboriginal groups) are far less contentious that the rights of non-aboriginal populations such as new immigrants from "world religions" or ethnicized populations.

Coming back to the theme of this paper, the notion of humanity is invoked in each of the two discourses of civilization and culture. It will be argued in the rest of this paper that the first discourse, in its current dominant avatar, is deeply problematic since it reifies difference (and potentially similarities too, although it does not focus on similarities at all), and is extremely limited by the use of the term as a noun (denoting a state of being, albeit an achieved one) rather than as a verb (denoting a social process). The other discourse of culture has a lot of potential despite having problems (mostly due to its affinities historically with the notion of civilization). However, it has the advantage of having passed through a thoroughgoing internal critique by those who professionally depend on it for a livelihood (anthropologists and cultural studies specialists for example). This questioning has produced healthy skepticism about its explanatory powers and also given some sharpness to its continued use making the discourse of culture capable of throwing up ideas of human that are most valuable for a globalizing world contradicted by a universalism and particularisms. I begin with the discourse of civilization.

The Return of Civilization in the Age of Empire

Has not enough been written about the fatal flaws that appear in the work of Samuel Huntington's thesis of the "clash of civilizations"?[15] Perhaps yes. Yet, everyday life under Empire (and its accompanying modes of torture) provides

14 See Benhabib, *The Claims of Culture*, and Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

15 See Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New

enough grist for the mill in ways that do not seem to halt the runaway success of the discourse of "civilization" which looms large in popular readings and conversations (never mind its scholarly demolishment). Given this, three major flaws of the Huntington thesis bear some repeating. First, there is a fundamental assumption of the *discreteness* of entities such as civilizations that is based not only upon erasing histories of intermixing, borrowing and sharing – all of which assume the à priori existence of discrete categories, but more importantly, the erasure of the genesis of civilizational categories or the *categorization* process itself by which one arrives at the existence of a particular number of different civilizations. Secondly, Huntington's thesis stereotypes civilizations by making them internally homogenous and unitary, and I would add, far more systematic than they actually are in their existence. This of course, is a necessary condition for the thesis since it needs the stability of systems in order to narrate their clash. Thirdly, Huntington naturalizes civilizations by not admitting their own histories of creation and change. There are many other flaws identified by various scholars, but none are more debilitating than the above mentioned. Here I only wish to briefly develop further some of the more implicit implications of the third critique above in order to make a call to abandon the notion of civilization (again!) as one that is incapable of explanatory value.

The spectacle amidst the ruins of Falujah of some Iraqis dancing in celebration around the dead bodies of four US contractors is met with shock and disgust by observers in the Euro-American parts of the world.[16] It is also met with shame and dismay by many observers in the rest of the world. Until the photographs from Abu Ghraib break into public view sending waves of shock and contempt (for the exposed hypocrisy of the "civilizing" West) in most of the non-Euro-American world, and shame and dismay in the Euro-American world. For brief moments it becomes possible to at least claim that we may all be better viewed as "savages" – the classic antinomy of civilized – on the basis that we all, across so-called civilizational divides, are capable of rejoicing at the death, torture and humiliation of other humans – albeit objectified as enemy Others.

But, such counter-discourses to the quite popularly accepted civilizational thesis prove to be very weak precisely because they do not take into account the power of the civilizational discourse which is built around the transcendental, i. e., de-historicized notion of civilization as a claim of difference in systems of

York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Edward Said, "Clash of Definitions," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Hugh Gusterson, "The Seven Deadly Sins of Samuel Huntington," in Catherine Besteman and Hugh Gusterson (eds.), *Why America's Top Pundits Are Wrong: Anthropologists Talk Back* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 24–42.

16 This paper was written for a conference in 2007 and so bears some of the historical marks of those years of the war on Iraq.

values. The question that the discourse of civilization allows as a retort to the above counter-discourse is: how can "uncivilized" behavior be *equally* shared across divisions that are built around *differences?* Although the notion of civilization does contain the possibility of positive and negative achievements within it, it is also true that it inherently requires that no two sets of achievements be deemed equal, since it ultimately rides on an à priori assumption of difference across the civilizational divides. In other words, invoking civilization itself demands that one of the above has to emerge as more uncivilized than the other.

This sets into motion a series of attempts in public discourse to explain both, Falujah (not the murderous invasion of it, but the celebratory spectacle around the death of the contractors) and Abu Ghraib, with the hope of keeping alive the validity of the discourse of civilization. For instance, cultural artifacts such as "civilizational balance sheets" based upon dubious calculations and accounting methods, and constant reproductions of "civilizational presence" – all acts of terror have to be traced to civilizational deformities, and all acts of kindness must derive from civilizational value – are deployed to defend the discourse of civilizational divisions. These accounting registers work to keep alive distinctions between civilizational entities and also the hierarchies among these civilizations.[17] So, we are proffered the tragically weak defense for the spectacle of Falujah by being told about the "legendary hospitality of Iraqis" (not only from defensive Iraqis but even from many American military personnel occupying Iraq, perhaps as a way to deflect the criticism about their presence in Iraq – after all if you can show that you are welcomed, then you can stay), a point that although probably true, is too painfully insufficient to counter the civilizational discourse. It also demonstrates the underlying unevenness of the discourse – Islam can only claim a glorious past (itself always open to question) or an innocuous and far from unique aspect of everyday behavior as a positive quality (e.g., hospitality) as evidence of its *civility*, whereas the West can claim a glorious present riding on the crest of the alleged successes of modernity itself. The non-coevalness of Self and Other in the process of making Objects of anthropological study is complete in this picture.[18] Appropriately, on the other side of

17 The most dramatic of these discursive clashes is of course the "Western" vs. "Islamic" one (where both categories are racialized, but also gendered with men and women performing different functions to maintain the categories, and based ironically on religion despite the former claiming to be civilized because of its purported secular character). But discursive clashes also occur along Huntington's other reified civilizational axes (witness discussions around Gujarat in India, Israel-Palestine, and Rwanda – the last mentioned of which should not surprise the inventor of the thesis since he is anyway unsure whether Africa has a civilization or not).

18 See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

the debate, the discourse on Abu Ghraib (through the official trials) viewed it as an aberration of a case of misguided individuals at best, a corrosion of key institutions at worst, leaving the high-grounded moral-ideational structure of "Western civilization" intact in the perception of its self-styled civilization mongers.[19] The historical tensions between the use of the term civilization as a noun (for an achieved state of being) and its use as a verb (for a social process), and the fact that it was capable of having positive and negative content is lost. This is the burden of civilization. Consequently, while the view that we may all be uncivilized ought not to be a new one, it still manages to appear new for a short time in public imaginations of Self and Others, only to be rejected ultimately by the hegemonic assumption of civilization of the powerful.

The problem I wish to underscore here is that the current discourse of civilization does not *logically* allow for the possibility that all civilizations can be both civilized and uncivilized, or what Coleridge spoke of as "mixed good" (quoted in Williams). A radical and fundamental difference (based on transcendental moral and value systems) is necessary for civilization to exist as a signifier today. In other words, *difference* precedes civilizational encounters or clashes. It already exists outside discourse, as a fetishized object to be "discovered" by individuals operating ironically from within the same discourse that hides its own *production* of that difference. It is an endless repetitive performance of the tragi-comedy of the German tourists in O'Rourke's classic *Cannibal Tours* who come in search of Papuans who they believe live very different ways of life than their own, and not surprisingly "find" all their preconfigured ideas to be true in every encounter on their tour. Throughout this experience, the Papuans, even after the end of the so-called "cannibal" phase of their existence, still remain primitive, radically different (one tourist even admits to their being "humans afterall") and most importantly, separate in the consciousness of German tourists whose own history of colonization of New Guinea never ruptures this image. Renato Rosaldo's term "imperialist nostalgia" wherein one mourns the loss or decline in a way of life that one has helped to destroy,[20] needs to be supplemented with another term, perhaps "imperialist amnesiac impatience" captured by the reflections of one German tourist in the film who frets over the lack of "motivation" among the Papuans and thus forsees the need for

19 As in other times in history, there are always voices of dissent. However, it is a telling reminder of the dominance of the civilizational discourse (and a sobering reminder of the limits of popular resistance in a world of bureaucratic and technocratic power) that the peace movement although made invisible by the corporate media, did not ever exert the kind of pressures needed to prevent the war – perhaps only to make the war mongers work harder at pursuing their projects.

20 Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

"us to teach them how to live better" without any cognition of how this had been precisely what had produced the modern Papuans in the first place.

Part of the power of the discourse of civilization is its hegemonic hold over ideas of humanity especially with the onset of new Empire. In this context, civilization makes it socially possible to prove one's humanness. In fact, one can only do so by claiming that one *has* a civilization that has demonstrated its humanistic proclivities. Civilization as *genetic property* that is inheritable, not legally, but genetically, implies group membership in a demarcated and bounded entity that is also spatialized.[21] There is therefore the need to prove to others holding the lens of "humanity" that one's civilization has demonstrated such humanistic ideas and values. This produces debates that, despite their limited utility to challenge dominant assumptions of civilizational superiority, have the ultimate effect of maintaining civilization itself as a valid category of explanation. The notion of purported civilizational difference is never brought into history. Thus, Charles Taylor's critique of Saul Bellow's criteria that the civilizational worth of Zulus depended on whether they have or could ever produce a Tolstoy brings to light the issue of power and who decides what constitutes as civilizational achievement.[22]

Falujah and Abu Ghraib point to the worthlessness of measuring civilizational worth. It is far more productive, for instance, to wonder whether the "celebrations" at Falujah (and other occupied zones) were genuine "performances of savagery" by those who no longer carried the "burden of civilization," namely, the continually colonized and stereotyped modern savages, the 21st century descendents of some of the oldest "civilizations" of the world? Such a questioning brings into relief the fact that globalization has indeed facilitated the "performance" of identities mediated through cable networks and consumed in living rooms of the civilized. Borrowing from Bourdieu, a civilizing *vision* (of the West) produces its own civilizational *divisions.* The civilized and the savage only become themselves through the performance of savagery by the latter in the context of conquest. For, this performance of savagery always occurs precisely at the point of the (colonial or imperial) encounter thereby signaling "difference" in the only way available to those who exist under oppression on the other side of the international division of labor (the economy is always also an economy in signs). What is banished from such civilizational discourse of "difference" ("look how different they are from us, yet again") is of course the savage nature of

21 Although it sometimes appears that civilization can be developed or cultivated (for example, one can show that one has become civilized by adopting whatever passes off as democracy), this is but a chimera that hides the reality that a "naturalized citizen" of the civilized world is always a second-class citizen, a Johnny or more commonly a Jaffar-come-lately.

22 But see a critique of Taylor in Rustom Bharucha, *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking Through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 47–52.

colonization, and Empire – this time around, not only unilaterally executed, illegal, leaving death and degradation in its wake, but most importantly clothed as a 21st century version of manifest destiny and civilizing mission (not simply pacification or democratization).

There is another aspect of this discourse. It is firmly based upon "expert knowledge" appropriate to an age of global information. This includes knowledge produced explicitly for public consumption (not only on Iraq, but also on global warming) with the full knowledge that it will be replaced in the near future by more updated knowledge[23] (intelligence reports on the military aspects of the war, insider information on the economic profiteering aspects of "re-construction," and the incredible level of mediation via embedded reporting). 21st century's first war of Empire has successfully demonstrated how power / knowledge operates to produce the Human as object of the machinery of truth régimes. Humanity then is the prisoner celébré of Empire. The burden of civilization weighs as heavily on imperial powers today as in colonial times.

Yet, today's burden is not the burden of choice between civilization and savagery, but of the savagery *within* civilization. It is the burden of civilization as savagery. In other words, in order to develop ideas of humanism for the Global age we need to shake off the burden of civilization – a discourse that has become a burden for the presence and existence of the *civil* – both, in its disparaging sense of "a formal and deceptive pretence, a merely external accommodation to some conventional code of conduct,"[24] and in the sense of a space in society where citizens freely communicate. The pursuit and proclamation of civilization has itself shown us what savagery is and can be. If the ideas of an age are the ideas of its ruling classes, then civilization has made us all savages in this age. The task is to construct (not re-construct) ideas of humanity and a humanism from the horror of civilization. Let us examine whether culture fares any better as an entry point to speak of ideas of humanity in a global age.

23 The temporal excuse of knowledge-based decisions is exploited to the hilt by the politicians and people who claim that given the available knowledge at that time, the decision to go into Iraq was moral and rational. What is lost in this confusion is the simple possibility of the intelligence machinery having a vested interest or the government having a vested interest in producing particularly limited types of knowledge.

24 Gyorgy Markus, "Culture: The Making and the Make-up of a Concept (An Essay in Historical Semantics)," *Dialectical Anthropology* 18 (1993): 3 – 29.

Culture, Difference and Humanity

A basic tension exists within the question of humanity as it is conventionally approached: are we all essentially one (any differences being superficial, only on the surface) or, are we all essentially different (any similarity being only a veneer, a chimera)? All too often this tension manifests itself in the form of a tacit acceptance of the formula: biologically one, culturally many. Or, biologically united, culturally divided. Apart from the glibness of such a position that would cause most people to think about its explanatory value, the above direction of the discourse of culture is seemingly incapable of raising the kind of questions that are necessary to work through the most basic problems with the concepts of culture and difference. For instance, entering such a discourse precludes the possibility of seeing two historical positions that existed around human "difference," both operating within the context of racism. Walter Benn Michaels distills these from the debates around racism in the USA in the 1920s. At that time, racist positions argued that differences (such as those that characterized as "races") were one of *degree* and not one of kind, for the reason that only differences in degree could be compared and hierarchized to produce superior and inferior races. On the other hand, the anti-racist position was to counter the difference in degree of the racists with a difference in *quality.* The reasoning was that such a position denies comparability (two radically different entities cannot share anything for comparison) and hence promotes a formal equality of races. It is important then to know which notion of difference we refer to when we pose the question – are we essentially one or different?

As the historically oldest field charged explicitly with the study of "culture," anthropology has attempted to change this discourse by insisting on a number of things – the non-existence of hermetically sealed cultures, the historicity of cultures, the futility of speaking in essentialist ways about sociocultural constructions such as "humanity" or groups such as cultures, and the propensity to reify culture when it is actually produced actively in social life. Born from the quest for an understanding of the Other (in order to purportedly understand the Self through the detour of the Other, as Paul Ricœer put it), anthropology got caught in its own vortex until recently when the relation between the Self and Other and the anthropologist's own agency in producing the Other (and hence the Self) became topics for interrogation. This has led to radical and immanent critiques of the concept of culture within anthropology. At the risk of unfairly representing a 150 year dynamic history all too briefly, I present a particular view of the history of the concept culture within anthropology in order to explore a way out of the above discourse of humanity, beyond the sameness and difference debate.

In mid-19th century Europe and north-America, the classical notion of culture

as "property of the few" (an Arnoldian view where to be cultured was to *have* a culture signaled by certain achievements thought to be fine and cultivated) slowly gave way to more anthropological notions. At least three breaks (or waves) can be identified over the next century or so. The first break symbolized by the Tylorean (and later Boasian) view of culture as an all-inclusive term for all human beliefs, values, rituals and behavior that are learned in particular ecological contexts and determine human behavior, resulted in culture being viewed as "property of all" (one still *has* culture, except that all have some culture and hence there exist many culture*s*). This notion of cultures (in the plural) was firmly cemented by the Boasian anthropological enterprise which seriously built up the ways to study *different* cultures (almost always, difference was assumed along racial and ethnic lines). A second break was the move to distinguish the *cultural* from other aspects of life. Culture then finally acquired its own realm of being and knowledge akin to how Durkheim carved out a space for the social. This move may be best exemplified by the Weberian inspired Geertzian push to use culture to refer to those human activities specifically engaged with meaning construction via symbols. Here *culture* in the singular becomes in Raymond Williams' use of the term, an "ordinary" condition of being for all humans. We thus have two different notions – cultures and culture – in operation at least since the earlier half of the 20th century. The former refers to groups that are culturally different whereas the latter refers to an aspect of how all humans live.[25] Over the last few decades, a third break occurred that made the notion of different cultures problematic. Thus, a culture is no longer assumed to be a group that shares a cultural way of life. Instead culture (the activity) and culture (the group) are viewed as constituted by power (struggles over meaning-making) thus making margins and borders between "cultures" blurred or contested, highlighting interstitial spaces, making the hybrid into the normal condition of being, and turning the focus of anthropologists to the process of Othering rather than simply the study of the Other.[26] It is now a normal anthropology (in the Kuhnian sense) that speaks of the *production* of the Self through production of the Other (and not a discovery of the Self through the detour of the Other). Difference is thus historicized in such a discourse of culture.

The question of humanity may be further reconfigured by taking into account current anthropological insights on the question of community. The question

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25 William Sewell, "The Concept(s) of Culture," in Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (eds.), *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 35 – 61.

26 See Fabian, *Time and the Other*, Lila Abu-Lughod, "Writing Against Culture," in Richard Fox (ed.), *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press, 1991), 137 – 62, Michel Ralph-Trouillot, "Anthropology and the savage slot: The poetics and politics of otherness," ibid., 17 – 44.

becomes less about what is shared or not, and more about how communication and conviviality occurs through and beyond difference. Since the question of humanity is tied very intimately to the question of community (both of which are tied to the notion of culture), we could follow the recent example of scholars working on theories of community who have distinctly shifted their focus from viewing community as an essence (the core of a community) to examining the social and cultural construction of community (the borders or margins of a community where practices of exclusion are reproduced). In its classically modern form, community is seen as a hegemonic project that requires homogeneity. Differences that exist (and are continually produced) within borders are sought to be domesticated and contained in order to build community as an expression of a prior, fixed identity and shared interests usually derived from a singular logic such as the economy or cultural values. Yet, the forms of community that are emerging today in a global era are not necessarily modern in this sense. For, communities are increasingly seen to be spaces where difference escapes domestication, where the modernist project of hegemony is very weak or non-existent, where community formation produces multidimensional identities, and where community operates on no single fundamental logic, such as class, caste, culture or place. Apart from not being clearly demarcated, such communities are thus not modern spatial expressions of a *common being*. They are better viewed in the sense that Jean Luc-Nancy argues as quests, not for a *commonality of being* (a substance, a unity that is held in common by the community) but for a *being in common* (a political act).[27]

A humanistic anthropology detects the Other in the making of the Self, but also moves beyond to see not "I" but "we" as the start of the journey of knowledge. This is a shift towards adopting a methodological relationalism instead of the methodological individualism that dominates much of social science.[28] In this it needs to scrupulously avoid the tyranny of patriarchal communitarianism and the alienation of market individualism. Whereas the discourse of civilizations fatally dissociates civilizational diversity from disparity or inequality, the discourse of culture which although built around the notion of difference is not transcendental and hence contains within itself the tensions of diversity and disparity. This does not mean that all differences always results in inequality; but it does mean that economic inequality and political power differentials overdetermine cultural differences – each is a process that is an effect produced by the interaction of all the others. Given such a complex reality, the reification of differences is the easiest blunder to make in the inter-

27 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, transl. by Peter Connor et. al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), Touraine op. cit.

28 See Bourdieu and Waquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology.*

rogation of humanity. As Bharucha asks: "How does one begin to respect – and not just tolerate – cultural differences? Can economic inequalities be included in one's respect for cultural difference?"[29]

Conclusion: Humanity and Humanism

In sum, the question of ideas of humanity leads one to the question of culture and difference, especially how differences are constructed in social interactions. Here, the discourse of culture is vastly superior to that of civilization for reasons I have outlined above. I wish to conclude with a brief consideration of how attention must be paid to power which suffuses most interactions where difference emerges. Understandings of culture have benefited by an increased focus on the politics of humanism rather than on the idea of humanity itself, by new ways of diagnosing modern forms of power that subjugate and control humans by subjectifying and objectifying humans even as they claim to be emancipatory. In this sense, the quest for universal human rights many times falls prey to the seductions of naïve or liberal humanism by constructing itself as a project of protection of human subjectivities *innocent of power* even while making particular subalterns the objects or targets of the universalizing human rights machine. The challenge is to make a space between the universal abstract individual and the illiberal community in order to defend difference within an anti-essentialist politics that acts as a useful foil to liberal humanism. It must be remembered that this defense of difference is not a defense of pre-configured transcendental difference but of emergent ones always contingent upon the context of inter-cultural communication usually suffused with power differentials. Such a defense of difference seems far more useful for a project that seeks to construct ideas of humanity than dominant forms of multiculturalism which proceed normally by reifying difference. Arguing with Bharucha, one can say that multiculturalism's discourse has been somewhat stultifying in its easy embrace of cultural differences without actually calling for serious interactivity across cultural difference. We may be multicultural nations or communities but we may simultaneously be indifferent to difference since we are not called upon to live in the intercultural. What is not highlighted enough is Bharucha's notion of the "constructions of Otherness" where the "I" is always constructed through struggling with / against Somebody's Other. As we stand in the beginnings of the next terrifying century of human stewardship of the world, the interrogation of our humanity could not be more apt.

29 Bharucha, *The Politics of Cultural Practice*, 3.